

Dear Fellow Academy Members,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the Akademie der Künste for the honour of being invited to become its member, for its ongoing support and for this opportunity to speak here today.

The tragedy, which is unfolding in my country, Ukraine, is constantly in my heart and on my mind. Long before February this year, in many films – both documentary and fiction – I was trying to describe the tragic events of our history, which have not been sufficiently reflected upon and condemned, and which have a direct link with the war we are living in today. Long before February this year, I was saying that the Russian aggression against Ukraine was almost inevitable. Regrettably, very few people took my message seriously. In 2018, I made a fiction film “Donbass” – describing civilizational collapse, which occurs everywhere where Russia invades.

It is only in the spring of 2022, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine actually began, that the film was released in the US and the UK, and re-released – more widely – in many European countries. Back in 2018, most spectators and critics who saw the film blamed it for “lacking hope”. However, since February 2022, the world media has been describing my film “Donbass” as a “prophecy”.

This war is a personal tragedy for me and my family. My father and mother, who were born respectively in 1939 and 1940, in Ukraine and in Southern Russia, first became refugees as small children, in 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the USSR. Today, in 2022, my elderly parents are once again refugees – they had to escape from the Russian invasion, to flee Kyiv, the city where they lived their entire adult lives.

In 2021, I made a documentary film “Babi Yar. Context” about the extermination of Jews in the German occupied Ukraine during WWII. Having felt a new war and a new humanitarian disaster approaching, I considered it necessary to make this film – perhaps, as a kind of warning about this forthcoming tragedy. This film shows what happens to a society when its thin layer of civilization is peeled off and when, fighting for survival, a man becomes capable of killing fellow men. It was obvious to me that in the forthcoming war the place of the Jews may be taken by citizens of Ukraine or, indeed, of any other country, which will find itself under Russian occupation.

“Babi Yar. Context” was screened in Cannes in May 2021 and, to my deepest regret, the only country, where the film was criticised, was Ukraine, where it was branded as “anti-Ukrainian”. Since that moment on, everything I did or said has been criticized by radical forces within and outside of Ukraine, which grew louder and more extreme since the moment the war broke out in February.

I presume that all of you here have encountered or witnessed numerous examples of such radicalization. Long before the full-scale invasion began, there were forces in Ukraine, which tried to drag the country away from its chosen path of democratic modernity. Only in my field

of work, in cinema, there have been many alarming instances. For example, in 2018, the Ukrainian Oscar Committee, of which I was at the time a member, made an attempt to disallow Ukrainian films, shot in any language except for Ukrainian or Crimean Tatar, to qualify for an Oscar nomination. Obviously, in a multi-national contemporary European society such a rule is considered totally undemocratic. I fought against this proposal, but only after president Zelensky came to power in 2019, this language-based restriction was abolished.

We all know that in February 2022 these same radical forces launched a full scale “culture war” against anyone or anything they consider “anti-Ukrainian”, which is basically anything or anyone they don’t like or don’t agree with.

Their campaign gained popularity within Ukraine, which, in a way, can be explained as a rather natural human reaction to the crimes and atrocities, committed by the Russian invaders. However, having gained sufficient ground in their home territory, the radical “culture activists” brought their campaign to Europe and – to my amazement – achieved incredible results! Particularly, in Eastern European countries, where the memories of recent Socialist past and Russian occupation, are still quite fresh. We have all heard of numerous instances, which took place in different European countries, when film screenings, theatre performances, concerts and art exhibitions were cancelled because they were branded as potentially “anti-Ukrainian”.

Again, drawing from my personal experience, there was an attempt to cancel a play I wrote based on the Prix Goncourt winning novel by Jonathan Littell “The Kindly Ones”, and staged at the Youth Theatre in Vilnius (Lithuania). I don’t want to bore you with details but I can just quote a letter sent by The Ukrainian Association of the Researchers of Holodomor and Genocide of Ukrainians to the Culture ministry of Lithuania and to the Theatre, as well as to the Lithuanian media. The letter claimed that such a performance will inevitably receive a “negative” reaction in Lithuania and abroad and will “represent Ukraine in a wrong way”.

Fortunately, after many discussions within the Theatre and representatives of the Lithuanian culture ministry, and in spite of a rather loud campaign to cancel my play, launched in the Lithuanian and Ukrainian social media, the decision was taken to allow me to continue rehearsals, as the Ministry concluded that they cannot judge a work of art before it has actually been created. I’m very grateful to my Lithuanian colleagues for their support and for their democratic decision. They respect freedom of artistic expression as a fundamental value and a fundamental human right. The premiere of the play took place yesterday in Vilnius and was very enthusiastically received by the audience.

I’m hearing accounts from various colleagues from different East European countries of absurd and ridiculous instances of “culture cancelling”. For example, I’ve been told that a theatre in Poland felt necessary to change the text of Chekhov’s “Three sisters”, replacing the famous “to Moscow, to Moscow” with “to Kyiv, to Kyiv”.

We are also witnessing many bizarre attempts to re-write the history of cinema. For example, only a few days ago, during the Awards Ceremony held by the European Film Academy, a statement was made by a group of Ukrainian film producers that “the greatest documentary film of all times, Man with a Movie Camera by Dziga Vertov, was shot in

Ukraine and therefore is a “Ukrainian film”, and that the film’s “Ukrainian identity was stolen from it” (presumably, by the Russians). Dziga Vertov, whose real name was David Kaufman, was born in the Polish town of Bialostok in the Russian Empire in 1896, in a Jewish family. His family moved to Petrograd in 1915, and after the October revolution he settled in Moscow, where he began producing first news reels and documentary films, which are now universally recognised as the early masterpieces of documentary film art. Vertov’s greatest film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, was shot in Moscow, Kyiv and Odessa in 1929 and was, indeed, produced by the “All Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration” studio, which was one of the first Soviet film studios, as well as the ones in Moscow and Leningrad/St Petersburg. Thus, if we want to be historically accurate, we have to refer to Dziga Vertov (David Kaufman) as a Polish Jew, born in the Russian empire, who was active as a film maker in the USSR and who has become the founding father of the Soviet documentary cinema. To claim that “*Man with a Movie Camera*” is a Ukrainian film simply because it was shot in Ukraine, and that Dziga Vertov is a Ukrainian filmmaker because he happened to work in Ukraine for a while is simply wrong. If we go along this line of attribution, we should proclaim Eisenstein and Bunuel to be Mexican film directors, Tarkovsky to be an Italian filmmaker, Fritz Lang – American; Dovzhenko – Russian; Nabokov – Swiss; Thomas Mann – American; Gogol, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Keats, Shelly – Italian, etc., etc, etc.

I don’t think that building cultural identity by re-writing or censoring history of art can lead to a success. I also don’t think that such “re-writing” should be encouraged by the European cultural institutions. Of course, if we don’t want to simply replace one propaganda with another one. In my opinion, these are all very dangerous symptoms. Re-writing 19th century plays, destroying books and knocking down monuments to poets, closing down exhibitions, disrupting theatre and film shows are barbarian acts. This barbarity should be stopped or at least condemned.

I believe that the role of a cultural institution is to support an artist, to defend freedom of artistic expression and to preserve cultural heritage in all its shapes and forms. Art should be free and culture should remain to be a domain for dialogue, for uncensored intellectual exchange, defining and describing the time we live in.

I thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention!

Sergei Loznitsa
Berlin, 16 December 2022